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Bias-Free Children's Books:

6 The Continuing Crusade of Nancy Arnez



By Harriet Jackson Scarupa

As a child and teenager growing up in Baltimore in the '30s and '40s, Nancy Levi Arnez loved to read. Almost every Saturday she and her two sisters would go to the children's room of the Enoch Pratt Free Library and each would check out a huge stack of books which they'd devour during the week.

But sometimes the books made her angry. Some of them contained that word — "nigger" — and whenever she saw it she would cross it out and write in "Negro." And if she found herself reading "negro," instead of "Negro," she'd make that substitution too.

Then as a Baltimore junior high school English and history teacher in the '50s, she became "extremely aware that good materials relating to the Black experience were rare and many of the materials that were available were derogatory. This was especially true in the history area where books showed slaves enjoying slavery and being cared for quite properly by their white masters and that sort of thing."

Those books made her angry, too. So she and other Black teachers often would introduce their students to more realistic learning materials, a favorite being the Negro History Week (now Black History Month) kits prepared by the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History [renamed the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History.]

Today, Nancy Levi Arnez is chairman of the department of educational leadership and community services at Howard University's School of Education and has a 34-page *curriculum vitae* listing her jobs in education, research projects, publications, professional affiliations, consultancies, speaking engagements, honors and awards, including the Distinguished Faculty Award for Outstanding Research she received from Howard in 1983, and a

fourth place designation in the 1985 international competition for Phi Delta Kappa's Biennial Award for Outstanding Research.

Through the years, she's focused her research, writing and lecturing on topics as diverse as teacher attitudes towards poor children, the role of public education, school superintendent-school board relations, teacher burnout and Black parental choice of private schools. But she's never abandoned that initial concern that led her to wield her pencil against all those defamatory "niggers."

She's still concerned about the way Black people and the Black experience are portrayed in the books children read. She's concerned even though the word "nigger" has just about disappeared from children's books. She's concerned even though many of the most blatant examples of racial stereotyping (e.g. "Little Black Sambo") have been removed from most library shelves. She's concerned even though many people seem to think that decrying negative Black images and promoting positive Black images is a '60s issue — part of the whole "Black is beautiful"/Black pride/Black power ideology that seems rarely voiced in these days of "making it," "moving into the mainstream," identifying as a "Buppie" (Black upwardly-mobile professional.)

"The issue of racism in children's books — and all media — is still important and I've always thought it important because I want to be sure that Black kids do not get negative images of themselves," says Arnez as she sits in an office whose walls prominently display a photograph of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X, another of the Rev. Jesse Jackson and two large posters, one depicting "The Unfolding of Afro-American History," the other, "Great Kings and Queens of Africa."

"African-American people need to feel good about themselves and part of that is reading some good things about them-

selves," she insists. "Not that everything about us is perfect, that everything about us is good, but certainly everything is not bad and all Blacks are not criminals or whatever that is negative. So we need *balanced* treatments in order for [Black] people to feel more of a sense of upgrading their situation."

"I think people need to have correct information about themselves whether they're in the mainstream or not," she adds. "In fact, that's one way of getting into the mainstream if that's what people want. Not knowing something about your history and your life and your culture and not believing you did anything positive in life, to me, is detrimental in terms of moving ahead economically. We need to have this information so we can be unified and can move forward with strength the way other ethnic groups have."

In an essay, "Enhancing the Black Self-Concept Through Literature," which is included in the 1971 book, "Black Self Concept" (Addison-Wesley Publishing Company), Arnez argued that "a black cultural and ethnic chauvinism is necessary to balance the pendulum of negativism towards blacks." That pendulum analogy is one she still uses to reinforce her views. "If you're way down here," she says, indicating the floor with her hand, "it's not easy to get on balance. In order to move the pendulum from here [she indicates that low position again] to here [she indicates a mid-point position], we need lots and lots of positive books about Black children published and distributed. Some people talk as if we have finished the job. But, really, we have just begun."

Not only are books with positive Black images essential for Black children, but for white children as well. "All people have to have the sense of worth of all other people," she says, "because somehow or other if we're going to make any improvements in this life we are going to have to

8 mute that whole concept of white supremacy."

When Arnez dwells on such topics as white supremacy and those forces which she says "denude and denigrate Black people," her voice becomes a harsh, insistent whisper that contrasts sharply with the more musical, relaxed, story-telling cadences she uses to discuss positive children's books.

Activities in the Field

Through the years, in fact, Arnez has been equally concerned with positive and negative racial images as depicted in children's literature. She also has addressed the issue of sexism in children's books, though to a lesser degree. "Although I feel very keenly the whole concept of sexism, because the problems of racism are so overwhelming and because we just have so much strength and so much time, I have concentrated more on racism. But sometime a book's sexism is so glaring, I have to point it out."

The specific ways she has addressed racism in children's books include serving as a consultant to publishers, conducting research, writing book reviews and other articles for a variety of publications, running workshops for teachers and parents and, when necessary, donning the mantle of activist. A most polite, genteel activist who favors typical "professional" garb, she nonetheless can be hard-hitting (some say "militant") when she thinks of the needs of Black children, especially poor Black children, are at stake.

Observes Eloise Greenfield, a Washington-based writer with 17 published children's books to her credit and another in production: "Nancy has made a great contribution in making the public aware of some of the books that do exist — some of the good books and also some of the problem books. Very often parents see books that have won awards and they assume

"The issue of racism in children's books — and all media — is still important and I've always thought it was important because I want to be sure that Black kids do not get negative images of themselves."

that this means the books are good for children — and that's not necessarily true.

"Or parents are so glad to find books that are about Black children that they don't realize they need to stop and examine the books closely to see just what point of view the books are taking. For example, some books depict a situation where the Black family is not interested in helping to solve a child's problem, but white people step in and can solve the problem for the child. So the message is that whites can solve the problems that Blacks can't. That's a much more subtle kind of racism and Nancy has helped people examine books for some of these subtleties."

Beryle Banfield, president of the New York-based Council on Interracial Books for Children, which was founded 20 years ago to promote anti-racist and anti-sexist children's literature, calls Arnez "one of the leaders in the field [of promoting anti-racist books and calling attention to those with bias.] There's no doubt about it. We consider her an ally of the council."

While Arnez is concerned about the depiction of the Black experience in all media, she has concentrated her energies on books because she believes they have a

special impact on children. For one, books remain the prime learning materials in schools. "Even though we have other media in schools, teachers don't use them as much as they use books," she says. For another, as Banfield says, "We tend to say, 'Go to the book for verification.' Children use books and have used books in the context that, 'If it's printed, it's the gospel truth.'"

In the '70s, as a consultant to Silver Burdette Publishing Co., a leading textbook publisher, Arnez wrote a book which the company published, "Partners in Urban Education: Teaching the Inner City Child," and helped draw up guidelines for a multi-ethnic approach to schoolbooks. "In the beginning when publishers began to integrate their books, they simply tanned in the white faces of children," she observes. "Some of the publishers (such as Silver Burdette) realized this was inadequate and they invited some of us to come and offer suggestions."

One thing Arnez remembers pointing out was that "in a number of stories when Africans or Native Americans won a battle it was called a 'massacre'; when whites won, it was called a 'victory.'" She also remembers pointing out how frequently Africans and Native Americans were linked with such words as "savages" and "unenlightened," in contrast to "civilized" and "enlightened" whites.

Also in the '70s, Arnez and two other researchers (Bessie Howard, then director of the Teacher Corps in the District of Columbia, and Charles Martin, then editor of the *Journal of Negro Education*, received a Spencer Foundation grant to analyze racism and sexism in 100 children's books in an inner-city District of Columbia library.

They examined the books to identify such things as the race of the author and illustrator; whether Black or female characters in a story played a dominant or

subordinate role; whether Blacks and women were represented in a diversity of occupations; whether the illustrations portrayed Black people as all looking alike or whether they reflected the diversity of skin color, features and size that characterizes Black people in the real world; whether Blacks and girls/women were portrayed stereotypically, e.g. Blacks as happy-go-lucky and lazy, girls as inept "crybabies."

In an article in the July/October 1981 issue of *The Negro Educational Review*, Arnez briefly noted some of the findings of the study. Among them: "Black authors are much more likely to extol the beauty of blackness in their treatment of characters and emphasize the maintenance of Black values."

"Though the results seem natural, for one would ordinarily expect this to be the case, unfortunately, it seemingly has not entered the consciousness of Black people. If it had, home libraries and school libraries in Black communities would be filled with children's books written by Black authors. We all know that this is not the case, and the problem is not just with distribution, although this is an enormous problem. The problem also has to do with the attitude of Black parents and teachers who one often hears repeat that damaging piece of triteness: 'It doesn't matter what the child reads as long as he learns to read.'"

After taking parents and teachers to task for this attitude, the article presented an annotated bibliography of 17 children's books which the researchers found contained positive images about Black people. The most recent annotated bibliography Arnez has done of such books can be found in this year's Black History Month kit published by The Associated Publishers, Inc., for the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History, the organization whose materials she so appreciated

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when she was a junior high school teacher.

Representative Books

When Arnez pauses to show an interviewer some of the books she cites in her annotated bibliographies, her delight is palpable and she confesses, "You know I still enjoy reading children's books."

She picks up Mari Evans' "I Look at Me!" (Third World Press, 1974), exclaiming, "Ohhh, it's a delightful book. I love it. It's about a little boy looking at himself in the mirror and shows the good feelings he has about himself and his world."

"Another person whose books really are beautiful and almost make me cry is Sharon Bell Mathis. In this [she indicates "The Hundred Penny Box" (Viking Press, 1975), a 100-year-old aunt tells a little boy about her past as she pulls her pennies out of a box.

"And here is 'Alesia' (Philomel Books, 1981), the true story of a neighbor of Eloise Greenfield's who got hit by a car and became crippled. It shows her struggles and the support system she had through family and friends and finally shows her at her high school graduation and the great effort she made to walk across the stage by

herself. Oh, it's really a beautiful story."

"Beautiful," "delightful," "touching," "sweet," "stirring," "real" . . . the adjectives keep rolling off Arnez's tongue as she leafs through a few additional books and speaks approvingly of the authors' collective sense of responsibility. One of them, Sharon Bell Mathis, described that responsibility this way in a speech delivered at a 1974 writers' conference sponsored by Howard's now-defunct Institute for the Arts and the Humanities:

"Writing for Black children is a serious, life-directed thing. Critical. And absolute. It's an intensive care situation. Emergency love/service.

"Why?

"Because for all the beautiful writing, fine intentions, and powerfully positive images — too many Black children feel worthless, too many are almost spiritually dead, beyond the reach of men and women pounding away at typewriters — who are desperately trying to speak to them, to freeze-frame their self-destructive ideas and then show the freeze-frame to the child that he may see. But all the while we must soothe him, talk with him, understand and respect the abilities that he does have and that we — as a people — need. Our writing must be life-sustaining . . ."

Such noble sentiments seem far away as Arnez turns to some recent books which she believes perpetuate negative images about Black people. Consider just two of these: "Big Sixteen" (William Morrow, 1983) and "Jake and Honeybunch Go to Heaven" (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982), both of which are also discussed in the article she and Henry E. Hankerson did for this year's Black History Month kit.

"Big Sixteen," written by Mary Calhoun with illustrations by Trina Schart Hyman, tells of a big, strong handsome Black youth who is beholden to a white colonel, an "Old Massa" type, complete

with barefoot, handkerchief-wearing little Black servant girl at his side. Big Sixteen is so strong that he can lift two mules with no problem and can clear a forest in no time. So impressed is the colonel with Big Sixteen's strength that he challenges the youth to bring him the devil.

Big Sixteen digs down to hell — an all-Black hell — and there encounters the devil's wife, a grotesque creature with horns, claws, tail and a snarling dark face, African-style oversized jewelry (except that miniature skulls dangle from the hoops) and a huge Afro, seemingly a parody of that favored by many Blacks during the height of the Black consciousness movement in the '60s . . . Need one go on. "The whole story makes fun of African-American people in every way shape and form," Arnez declares.

"Jake and Honeybunch Go to Heaven," written and illustrated by Margot Zemach, is inspired by Marc Connelly's "The Green Pastures," which some find offensive in itself. It tells of a shiftless, not very bright Black man, Jake, who has a mule, Honeybunch, and lives in a dilapidated town called Hard Times.

Jake and Honeybunch get run over by a train and the two try to get into heaven, are at first refused admittance by a dapper, bow-tie wearing "God," and finally are allowed in after Honeybunch stirs up a ruckus and Jake manages to restore order. The two are even given a job: to hang up the stars and moon each night and gather them in the morning. But Jake, being lazy, sometimes forgets, and, being stupid, early on makes the mistake of donning two left wings which causes him to knock into everything in sight.

The all-Black heaven that is now his home is one in which grinning Black folks feast on fried chicken, barbecued ribs and pies, while a red hot mama sings it up with a garish nightclub band. This heaven, in sum, is far more orgiastic than spiritual.

"I'm not a book burner. I'm not saying, 'Burn these books.' [Those with negative racial images.] But I am saying, 'You don't have to buy them and shouldn't buy them if they contain offensive images.'"

"The whole book denigrates the spirituality of African and Afro-American religious life," Arnez contends. Because the book "is entirely demeaning to Black people," she wrote in a March 1983 review in *The Crisis*, "it is not recommended for purchase by any public school system, any public library or for any home."

What was most galling to some who had read the book was the publisher's claim that the story was based on African and Afro-American folklore and was therefore "authentic." In a review in the bulletin published by the Council on Interracial Books for Children, Beryle Banfield warned: "One danger is that Zemach's book will actually be perceived as black folklore. That it is not. What we actually have is a white perception of black folklore. Instead of a tale that is presented and meant to be enjoyed on many levels, we have a classic example of the 'comic Negro' stereotype." The original versions of stories in the Jake and Honeybunch tradition, the article earlier pointed out, "all suggest themes of rebellion and temporary power in a segregated society — elements completely missing from this book."

Such reviews became part of a campaign

Arnez helped launch to alert librarians, teachers and school administrators about the book in hopes that they would not order it or would halt its circulation if it already had been purchased.

The First Amendment Issue

The campaign, which was reported in publications as diverse as *Jet*, *The New York Times* and *American Libraries*, was largely successful. A February 18, 1983 article in *Publishers Weekly*, for instance, noted that the public library systems of Chicago, San Francisco and Milwaukee had refused to circulate the book on the grounds that it "perpetuates racist stereotypes."

The article also revealed a heated exchange of letters between the editor-in-chief of children's books at Farrar, Straus and Giroux and the city librarian of San Francisco. The editor cited the positive reviews that "Jake and Honeybunch" had received, the honors its author-illustrator had received for previous books and plaintively asked why the San Francisco library system was not purchasing the book. He also stated: "In these days when the will of a few is being imposed on the many, it seems important that those of us who care a great deal about books and children do what we can to counter the trend."

Writing to the president of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, the chief San Francisco librarian denounced the letter as a "blatant attempt to intimidate our children's librarians," adding that if the editor "really doesn't know why we are not going to buy 'Jake and Honeybunch,' he is in the wrong line of work and should be selling banjos to minstrel troupes." As evidenced in other letters and in articles in library and literary publications, other exchanges of views about the book were similarly heated.

The March 1983 issue of *American Libraries*, for one, reported that the controversy over "Jake and Honeybunch" "has

raised the familiar issue of selection vs. censorship," while that *Publishers Weekly* article observed that the controversy "highlights the dilemma of librarians faced with a work that may be offensive to some library users and raises the question whether a decision not to acquire such a work is, in effect, book banning."

Item 2 of the Library Bill of Rights adopted by the American Library Association includes the provision that library materials "should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval." In light of this provision, some accuse those who would discourage libraries from purchasing books that are deemed racially biased of being book burners guilty of endangering the First Amendment rights of children's book authors.

To such a charge, Arnez replies, "I'm not a book burner. I'm not saying, 'Burn these books.' But I am saying, 'You don't have to buy them and shouldn't buy them if they contain offensive images.'" While she is opposed to a book like *"Jake and Honeybunch,"* she realizes "there are so many ramifications to the First Amendment issue because if I say, 'Take certain books off the shelves,' then somebody else can say, 'We can't have anything on the shelves about Martin Luther King, Jr., because we don't like him or about Malcolm X because we don't like him.' So I wouldn't want to be that extreme—to say *all* books with some negative images should be banned—because others can be extreme about the things you think are important. That's why I stress *balance*."

This approach is evident in her response to the controversy surrounding Mark Twain's *"The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,"* which some Black parents would like to see banned from classroom use because of the plentiful "niggers" sprinkled throughout the book and other aspects which they consider demeaning to Black

"We have to be sure children are exposed to Black classics to balance these Anglo-Saxon classics [e.g. 'The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn'] that have some negative aspects."

people, and especially embarrassing to a Black child who is taught the book in a predominantly white setting. "If teachers are going to use 'Huckleberry Finn' in their classrooms," she believes, "they should not only look at it as a literary work, but also bring out the book's racial attitudes and relate them to the time in which the book was written. But even more important, is again, having *balance*. We have to be sure children are exposed to Black classics to balance these Anglo-Saxon classics that have some negative aspects."

As a librarian, Charlynn Spencer Pyne of Howard's Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, adds another perspective on the First Amendment issue. "I think there should be no limits to a writer's creativity," she observes. "But if books are labeled 'juvenile books,' that in itself is a form of censorship. If an author chooses to write juvenile books then he or she has taken on a responsibility that implies a certain restraint. It's always been understood that there is not going to be any pornography in the children's room [of a library.] Nobody cries 'censorship' about that. But when it comes to racism then the cry [of censorship] goes up."

Even more emphatic on this point is

Walter Dean Myers, a Black author of a number of popular children's books. In an article in a Council on Interracial Books for Children bulletin, he writes: "I am sorry if some librarians and some teachers feel they are being subjected to censorship by efforts to expose and label some books as racist. . . . But I personally would rather have my children exposed to explicit and prurient sex, which librarians do not mind censoring, than racist books. I believe that the human values I give my children will help them deal with filth. It is a far more difficult task to help them deal with the concept of being less worthy because they are Black, especially when that concept is being reinforced in school."

Some who learn of the controversy over *"Jake and Honeybunch"* or other specific children's books might be inclined to say, "So what? Why make such a big fuss over a few books? Isn't it making a mountain out of a molehill? An overreaction? A sign of supersensitivity which we as a people can well do without? And don't educators have more important things to be worrying about these days, anyway, than racism or alleged racism in children's books?"

But for Arnez and those who share her concerns, a book such as *"Jake and Honeybunch"* is symbolic of something more. "*'Jake and Honeybunch'* came out in 1982," she points out. "*'Big Sixteen'* came out in 1983. You'd expect the 1940 books, the 1950 books before the Supreme Court desegregation decision and even some of the 1960 books to be still negative. But it is kind of shocking when books published in the 1980s are extremely derogatory about African-American people and that's why we became so excited and decided we had to do something."

"Books always reflect the society," observes Beryle Banfield of the Council on Interracial Books for Children. "African-Americans are now again at risk. There is

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Nancy Arnez

A Round Circle

Nancy Levi Arnez comes from a family of teachers. Her mother was a teacher in the Baltimore public schools for 25 years. Her grandfather was a teacher. An aunt was a teacher. An uncle taught at Morgan State College. Her two sisters were teachers and are now both assistant principals, one in Baltimore, the other in Chicago. Arnez, herself, taught English and history on the junior high level for 13 years. "It's just the thing we did," she says. "We taught. Actually, I never thought of doing anything else."

Her teacher mother and her master plasterer father stressed the value of academic excellence to their three daughters and encouraged them in the favorite family pastime: reading. "We always had an extensive library at home and we used the Enoch Pratt Free Library extensively, as well," she says of her childhood. "We'd borrow as many books as the library would let us take out on one card and then we'd exchange books within the family."

Arnez's interest in teaching, reading and achieving academic excellence, nurtured in her family, was reinforced by her

experience in the then-segregated Baltimore public schools. "I'm by no means calling for segregated education, but I know my teachers in those schools were excellent," she says. "I can almost see them marching in front of my eyes right here. They were so good! So were my teachers at Morgan. So that, really, I had no difficulty when I went to Teachers College-Columbia, which was my first time in an integrated setting. I was more prepared than most of the white people around me and I think it was due to the brilliance, scholarship and commitment of those Black teachers — because I was only taught by Black teachers."

Arnez received an A.B. in English from Morgan State College and an M.A. in English and an Ed.D. in education administration from Teachers College. Her decision to leave classroom teaching was prompted by her realization, she says, that even though she had a doctorate "the Baltimore school system wasn't about to promote a Black female to a principalship at that point in time." When she was offered a job as director of student teaching at Morgan, she accepted it eagerly, seeing college teaching and administration as a new challenge.

From Morgan, she went on to hold teaching and administrative positions at Northeastern Illinois University in Chicago, coming to Howard in 1974. Arnez, who has no children of her own, says she considers her overall mission as a university teacher the same as it was when she stood in front of a junior high school classroom: "to open up the minds of my students and help them *think*."

Along with her teaching and administrative responsibilities, Arnez has always written — articles in educational publications, book reviews, newsletters, chapters in books, teaching manuals, curriculum materials, position papers, monographs, poetry (e.g. "The Rocks Cry Out," Broadside Press, 1969), a 788-page case study of school superintendent-school board relations in Washington, D.C., from 1973-75, "The Besieged School Superintendent" (University Press of America, 1981) . . .

In one of her first published articles in *School and Society* (March 19, 1966), Arnez wrote on "The Effect of Teacher Attitudes Upon the Culturally Different." An excerpt:

"A teacher does not operate in a vacuum with her classroom a self-contained

cell devoid of community and school pressures and influences. Her attitudes and hence her behavior are conditioned by the many factors which cause her to discriminate against lower-class children and prefer not to teach them. These feelings of teachers have led to a self-fulfilling prophecy. The students actually learn little because their teachers, convinced of their inability to learn, make little or no effort to teach.

"Needless to say, the teacher should be the focal point of programs designed to improve the learning experiences for disadvantaged youngsters. Teachers must be trained to provide them with the respect they crave, to be less judgmental, to understand their language and approach to life, to know which values and customs to select for change, and to know how children learn best. . . . Above all, a training program for teachers of the culturally different should provide opportunities for teachers to develop a warm, friendly, firm attitude and consistent behavior."

Such was the underlying rationale for a program Arnez co-founded at Northeastern Illinois University which bore the cumbersome title: The Cultural Linguistic Follow Through Research and Development Early Childhood Education Project. By holding workshops for teachers and paraprofessionals and developing manuals for them to use in inner-city classrooms in four cities (Chicago; Akron, Ohio; Tokepa, Kan.; Compton, Calif.), the federally-financed program attempted to help teachers develop a more positive attitude towards their pupils and better understand their pupils' needs. "The approach was to build on the children's strengths, not just their so-called weaknesses," Arnez explains, again emphasizing the value of the positive as she does in her crusade to ensure that children's books include positive racial images.

At Howard, one of Arnez's major research undertakings has been her study of the stormy 18-month tenure of Barbara Sizemore as superintendent of the D.C. public schools. The study was supported by research grants from the Spencer Foundation and the American Association of University Women. Drawing on interviews with school board members, teachers, parents and community activists as well as minutes of meetings, transcripts of hearings, newspaper articles and other materials, Arnez set out to document the reasons that led to Sizemore's dismissal

from the superintendency in 1975.

One of her findings: that those with vested interests in the status quo blocked Sizemore's attempt at reform almost every step of the way. When Arnez describes the study it is obvious that she was — and is — a partisan of Sizemore. When asked if this partisanship didn't interfere with her objectivity as a researcher, Arnez answers, "I don't think so. But then I don't think research is objective anyway. You [the researcher] always come from a certain value orientation."

Currently Arnez and Faustine Jones-Wilson, a professor in the School of Education who is also editor of the *Journal of Negro Education* and director of the Bureau of Educational Research, are conducting research on Black parental choice of private schools. Their findings will be based on responses to questionnaires mailed to parents in the Washington metropolitan area. "There's been very little research done on the topic," Arnez explains. "So we're trying to find out, first, why parents have decided to enroll their children in private schools and, secondarily, what the experience of their children has been in these schools."

"I love to research," Arnez confesses. She then adds, "And I love to write and I love to administer and I love to teach and I love the advocacy. I'm either doing one or I'm doing the other and I just seem to keep on doing them. It's a round circle. . . . This is me." □

Other Voices, Similar Themes

On the Howard campus, in addition to Nancy Arnez, two others who have been notably active in efforts to promote bias-free children's books and call attention to those with bias are Gloria Grant, an assistant professor in the department of Afro-American Studies, and Charlynn Spencer Pyne, a children's literature specialist and Caribbean and Latin American specialist with the Moorland-Spangarn Research Center.

Grant's interest in the field was sparked by her experience teaching at a Chicago school where she felt the books she was issued were not meeting the needs of her students. When she went to the University of Wisconsin to work on a Ph.D. she

began to focus her attention more closely on reading textbooks, writing her 1972 dissertation on "The Effect of Text Materials with Relevant Language, Illustrations, and Content Upon the Reading Achievement and Reading Preference (Attitude) of Black Primary and Intermediate Inner-City Students."

Since then she has made presentations, conducted workshops and written or co-authored articles in the general area of multicultural education and the more specific area of racism in children's books. She has been especially concerned with racism in the basal reader, the first book a child reads. In one study she was part of a multicultural team of educators that analyzed a popular basal reading series. (See article in the Summer 1979 issue of *The Journal of Negro Education*.) Texas, the largest state which follows a policy of statewide adoption of textbooks, uses this series in all its schools.

One of the findings of the study: that the series contained only one story — and not even a complete story — about Hispanic children. Yet Texas, which in 1976 had a Hispanic population of 20.7 percent, still selected this series for its schoolchildren. To Grant this indifference to ethnic needs symbolizes the way basal readers are still basically "Eurocentric" even as American society statistically is becoming more multicultural.

"People say, 'So what? I learned to read with all-white books,'" Grant remarks. "I say, 'Yes, but you also learned other things. You learned your place in the world and the place of others.'"

"Reading textbooks have become more integrated than when most of us were growing up," Grant acknowledges. "The racism in the more recent books is more subtle. The subtlety is usually in the omission [hidden message: minorities aren't important enough to be included] and also in the anthropomorphic approach, using animals as characters in place of people. That way publishers avoid the issue of race."

Grant teaches a course on Black Women in America and she frequently integrates some of her concerns about racism in reading texts into her lectures. "If you think there's not a lot of material on Blacks and not a lot of materials on white women, what shows up least in reading textbooks is information on Black women," she says. She also is planning a study which will seek to discover what



Gloria Grant

kind of reading texts children would prefer and would design if given a choice.

Meanwhile, with her "antenna always up," as she puts it, she has managed to pass on her concerns to her two children. "My son will show me bias in comic books," Grant says. "So I feel I must be doing a good job."

Charlynn Spencer Pyne has lectured on racism in children's books at Howard and for the D.C. public libraries system and has studied examples of negative stereotyping of Blacks in some of the historic children's books that are housed in the Moorland-Spangarn Research Center. (Yes, the center has several versions of "Little Black Sambo," originally published in 1899.)

In looking through the center's collection of children's literature, Pyne says she almost stumbled into "another field which I consider equally important and that is the fact that despite the negative images one finds in many books done by white writers there always have been concerned Black writers who devoted some of their attention to children."

"I was able to find textbooks an all-Black school district in Oklahoma published for its children in the '30s and these books were fantastic. As early as 1887, Mrs. A. E. Johnson did a Black children's periodical called *The Joy*. Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, Countee Cullen, W.E.B. Du Bois with his *Brownies' Book* [a children's magazine published in 1920 and '21], Carter G. Woodson [founder of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History] all wrote for children."

"So I think that while trying to combat

racism in the mainstream children's literature is important — and that's where the struggle lies if there's any activism — it's also very important to document in a scholarly way what Black people historically have done. We have a tendency to believe that it was just in the '60s that we became concerned with positive books for Black children. But there's a long tradition of such concern." One of Pyne's dreams: to do a major book on Black writing for children through the ages.

As the mother of two children who are growing up in an integrated milieu, Pyne sees children's books about the Black experience as especially important. "When my kids tell me about someone, I always ask, 'White?' or 'Black?' Now they refuse to answer. They say, 'Mom, it doesn't matter.' And they're right, it doesn't matter. But it's just that for so long that was what you asked.

"Whereas I know that I have to adapt and what my children say might be true I still want them to have some kind of consciousness of what it means to be uniquely Black in America and how important it is to be proud to be Black. I turn to books for that. I regard them as my allies. Books such as Lucille Clifton's 'All Us Come Cross the Water' (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973), books by Eloise Greenfield, Sharon Bell Mathis, Mildred Taylor . . ."

Nationally, the Council on Interracial Books for Children has stood in the forefront of the drive to promote anti-racist and anti-sexist children's literature and teaching materials. The council was founded 20 years ago on the principle that "children must be raised in a bias-free environment if they are to develop a positive self-identity and openness to people of other backgrounds and beliefs."

The organization publishes a bulletin which regularly reviews books, evaluating them for what it terms "human and anti-

Photograph by Brian V. Jones



Charlynn Pyne

human values" and placing children's books in a larger political, social and economic context. Special issues have highlighted such topics as "The Depiction of South Africa in U.S. Materials for Children" and "Children's Books on Martin Luther King, Jr."

The council also publishes reference books, monographs, lesson plans and audio-visual materials designed to develop pluralism in schools and society; conducts workshops on racism and sexism for librarians, teachers and parents; and brings to the attention of children's book publishers talented Third World writers and artists. Among its publications aimed at the general public is a handy letter-sized, three-panel brochure entitled "10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books for Racism and Sexism." (Copies can be obtained by writing the council at 1841 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10023.) □

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a systematic and determined effort to wipe out the civil rights advances won in the '60s. So given the climate, it's not surprising that in the last couple of years we have seen an increase in books that actually carry derogatory messages. I've just reviewed a book called 'Tancy,' which actually glorifies slavery and puts the onus of being a white man's concubine during slavery on the Black woman. So we must continue to be vigilant."

Disappearing Black Books

That racism in children's books is still an issue — albeit a muted one — in 1986 is disheartening to many who had considered the battle over it just about won. Equally disheartening, and even more distressing to them, is the fact that so few children's books depicting Black people and culture — in any manner — are being published these days, while many of the positive Black-oriented books that came out in the '60s and '70s have gone out of print.

"In preparation for African-American History Month I recommended to parents 50 children's books which I consider classics," says Banfield. "Twenty-six of these are out of print. And there are some frightening statistics indicating that Blacks are no longer of interest to publishers." An article in the September 1984 issue of *American Libraries*, for instance, noted that the New York Public Library's 1984 edition of "The Black Experience in Children's Books" booklist is about half the size of its 1979 edition. "The current list," it reported, "includes about 400 titles with only about 100 new titles added — an average of only 25 new books a year since 1979."

Such evidence fuels the belief that trade publishers of children's books have decided that "Black is out of style." Compounding this problem is the curtailment or demise of many small Black publishers

which had produced some books for children along with their other titles during the '60s and '70s.

Indeed, as Arnez surveys the whole children's book scene today, she sees few signs for optimism. "For a while — in the '60s and '70s — things were much better," she says. "A lot of these [positive books] were published when Black was beautiful, when you had Black studies programs in the schools, when you had people clamoring for Black books, when you had federal monies [e.g. via the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act which made \$1.3 million available to schools to aid the "culturally disadvantaged"]. But people aren't clamoring for Black materials like they used to, federal monies have dried up, many Black studies programs have closed down. Who's publishing us today?"

Arnez does not believe all the blame for the current state of affairs can be placed at the door of trade publishers who, after all, are in business to make money. If Blacks and socially concerned whites don't buy children's books that include Black people and include them in a realistic and positive way, she points out, publishers are not going to produce them. That's that. And what she still sees as the leading barrier that prevents people from realizing the importance of such books is that persistent notion that "It doesn't matter what a child reads as long as he reads."

"That's like saying, 'I don't care what my child eats as long as he eats,'" contends writer Eloise Greenfield. "He could be eating poison! Children are exposed to so much on television and elsewhere that is damaging we should be sure that what they read is nourishing. And I think that's the most important thing to ask about a book: does it nourish or does it tear down?"

Advocates for a renewed commitment to publishing "nourishing" children's books, to repeat Greenfield's adjective,

sometimes relate their concern to two problems which have been imprinted on the public consciousness recently: the relatively low reading scores of Black children on standardized tests and the projected decline in the number of Black teachers in the nation's classrooms.

Rudine Sims addresses the first problem in her book, "Shadow and Substance: Afro-American Experience in Contemporary Children's Fiction" (National Council of Teachers of English, 1982). "In light of all the recent publicity about the so-called decline in literacy among Americans and the continuing publicity to the effect that Black children as a group fare worse in reading than white American children as a group, there is a strong argument for increasing the availability of reading material in which Afro-Americans see themselves," she writes. "There is some evidence that readers who are members of nonwhite groups in this country can perform better when reading stories that reflect the world as they know it than when reading stories that do not." She then cites the findings of a study which support this belief.

Of the second problem, Arnez cites a prediction by G. Pritchey Smith of the University of North Florida that by 1990 out of 40 teachers a child will encounter during his school career, 2 of these, at best, will be Black or other minority. Gregory R. Anrig, president of the Educational Testing Service, makes a less dramatic but nonetheless disturbing prediction. In a front page February 9 article in *The New York Times*, he is quoted as saying, "By the year 2000, the percentage of minorities in the teaching force could be cut almost in half." Such predictions are based on the decrease in the number of minority college students majoring in education, the decrease in minority enrollment in the nation's colleges and universities overall and the higher failure rate of minority

teachers on new competency tests which some states have instituted.

"These predictions are devastating," says Arnez. "If what is predicted occurs it seems to me it's even more critical we have these kinds of positive materials [about Blacks and other minorities] in our classrooms. If we're not going to be there in person, then surely we ought to be there in some form or fashion." (She also believes all efforts must be made to ensure that the predictions do not come to pass.)

There are new reasons as well as old, then, for Arnez and others who are concerned with the visibility and positive depiction of Blacks in children's books to consider theirs a cause that is neither anachronistic nor irrelevant. For them, to use that old battle cry: *the struggle continues*. It's a struggle inspired by their cognizance of a singular reality: the boulder of racism will never budge — whether in children's literature or any other aspect of American life — if it isn't pushed.

"Last year the conference coordinator of the African Heritage Studies Association asked me what I was going to speak about at an upcoming conference," Arnez recalls. "I told her, 'Well, I guess I'll speak about racism and sexism in children's books.' She laughed and said, 'Nancy, I know that's what you're going to talk about. You've been talking about it for years.'" □